

HIEROGLYPH

Pilot: "The Book of Thresholds"

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ACT ONE

EXT. IMPERIAL HOARD - NIGHT

A fortress-like structure flanked by huge statues of dog and falcon-headed gods.

EXT. IMPERIAL HOARD COURTYARD - NIGHT

A courtyard inside the wall. Wide, stark, and quiet.

A Watchman's unconscious body suddenly lands on the ground. A moment later, a hooded DARK FIGURE alights beside it.

INT. HYPOSTYLE HALL - NIGHT

We follow the cloaked Figure between the forest of towering columns. A patrolling HOARD GUARDSMAN crosses in front of us.

He turns to the Figure, but before he can react, she holds up her palm and blows a plume of dust in his face. His joints lock up and he falls down. The Figure doesn't break a step.

Another Guardsman crosses a few columns ahead.

GUARDSMAN

Hey! What are --

The Figure suddenly flicks a dart that catches the second Guardsman in the neck, incapacitating him.

INT. VAULT ENTRANCE - NIGHT

A long, dim subterranean hallway yawns before us. Torches FLICKER uneasily.

At the end of the hallway, a heavy iron door with an impossibly complex lock (with several interlocking dials).

An armed sentry (WERIN) stands guard while his partner (KHETI) sits to the side, napping.

Werin notices a cold, foggy haze beginning to fill the far end of the dim hall. Kheti looks up. They both watch the fog gradually encroaching, growing thicker.

Then a sound, like FOOTSTEPS, slowly coming down the hall. The sentries exchange quick glances, tense and puzzled.

KHETI

Intruder?

WERIN

The bells haven't sounded...

But sure enough, a dark figure begins to materialize in the fog as it steps calmly closer and closer.

The two sentries snap into action, drawing their swords.

The Figure stops, still just a person-shaped splinter of darkness in the swirling fog. It raises its hands.

The torches flicker thru the fog. Suddenly, in the restless light, the Figure vanishes.

KHETI

Where'd he go?

WERIN

Get to the tower. Tell them we have a breach.

Cautiously, Kheti goes. Werin watches him fade into the fog.

Kheti feels his way along the wall. A hand touches his shoulder. Kheti turns, startled.

A few yards away, Werin hears no scream or struggle -- just the soft sound of a body slumping to the marble floor.

WERIN (CONT'D)

Lieutenant?

(no answer)

Kheti, are you okay?

Werin takes a few nervous steps back, searching for Kheti while holding his sword out into the thickening fog.

By now, he can barely see an arm's length in front of him, and he almost trips over Kheti, in a heap on the floor.

He checks his partner's vitals, but Kheti is just asleep.

And as Werin stands, we see the Dark Figure suddenly standing behind him -- an ambiguous presence in a hood and a mesh mask.

The Figure WHISPERS a short phrase in Werin's ear. At that, Werin's eyes roll back as he collapses.

The Figure advances past the sleeping sentries. With a flick of the wrist, the fog begins to clear, and the Figure approaches the wide vault door.

The Dark Figure raises its hands, palms open, and bows its head, WHISPERING fervently, almost praying, indistinct words that hiss and echo in the empty silence.

The lock dials spin wildly as we hear the THUNK THUNK THUNK of the door's massive bolts disengaging, as if by command.

The thick slab of a door drifts ajar, and the Dark Figure calmly enters the darkened chamber beyond.

INT. THE PHARAOH'S CHAMBERS - NIGHT

A dim bed chamber with an open wall. Beyond, hints of a darkened skyline -- obelisks and palm trees silhouetted against the rosy, pre-dawn clouds. Four men convene:

ODION SEN (59), the High Priest. A scholarly, cryptic man. His crisp white cassock gives him the look of something between a scientist and a clergyman.

CAPTAIN RAWSER (56), head of the Pharaoh's Guard. He wears polished leather armor and has a bronze cobra medallion around his neck. A man with a presence like cold granite.

BEK PENROY (30), the Magister, highest-ranking advisor to the Pharaoh. A frustrated-looking man in formal vestments. Shrewd but too arrogant for his own good.

And finally, the Pharaoh himself, KING SHAI KANAKHT (25), a young ruler, with a cool charm in his smile, and a quiet violence in his soul. He wears his night clothes, a robe and linen trousers, pacing barefoot across the cold marble -- a king who likes to feel his realm under his feet.

ODION
Acacian pirates?

BEK
This was no pirate attack.

RAWSER
We've long suspected there is a
Tauketi spy in the Sanctum.

SHAI
We could waste a lot of time listing
everyone who wants me dead. Let's
start with what's missing...

ODION
According to the Hoard Guardsmen,
just one scroll, a Black Shelf text
called the Book of Thresholds.

SHAI
Tell me about it.

Uncomfortable silence.

SHAI (CONT'D)
Surely one of you has something.

BEK
Your grace, these are some of the
least understood texts in the
Imperial Hoard.

SHAI

Is that the sum total of what we know? That our missing scroll was far too dangerous to read?

RAWSER

Your grace--

SHAI

Gentlemen. The shadow of apocalypse hangs over us, and you can't answer my simplest questions... Get out.

Odion and Rawser bow and leave. Bek remains behind. Shai doesn't look at him.

SHAI (CONT'D)

Did you not hear me, Magister Bek?

BEK

I was thinking we could take stock of our options, your grace, and --

Shai wheels around and backhands Bek.

SHAI

Your options are insufficient.

EXT. PALACE GARDENS - CONTINUOUS

Rawser waits in the lush garden under the stars. Bek hurries out, wiping his bloody lip.

BEK

He's bringing someone in.

INT. THE ABATON - MORNING

Two men at the bottom of a dank and dirty fighting pit. Ragged PRISONERS crowd the margins, shouting. Above, the PRISON GUARDS watch coldly, betting sacks of coins.

The first fighter is AMBROSE (32). His drained and abused physique is the shadow of someone who was once lean and nimble. His hair is long. His beard is matted. But his eyes betray a lingering spark of intellect, like a jackal.

His OPPONENT is a scarred, towering bull of a man.

The Opponent swings. Ambrose dodges, and answers with a punch that lands pitifully on the hulking creature.

The next punch catches Ambrose on the jaw, sending him backwards to the floor.

FLASHBACK: Abstract. Brief. Sunlight spills through tattered curtains. We see out the window as if from a bed. A woman LAUGHS softly. BACK TO:

Ambrose's ears ring as he shakes off the punch and gets back up. He steadies himself just in time to see his adversary's fist thundering towards him again.

The HIT snaps his face sideways. He stumbles to the ground.

FLASHBACK: A naked woman relaxing on her stomach, chin propped up. Her legs lazily swinging. Her ribs filling with air. Ambrose's hand sliding down the curve of her spine. BACK TO:

Again, Ambrose climbs to his feet. Again, he is knocked down.

FLASHBACK: The same naked woman looks over her bare shoulder; her warm, eyes beckoning us through her dark curls. BACK TO:

Ambrose staggers to his feet. His THROBBING heartbeat muffles the crowd. His Opponent grabs him and locks him in a choke hold. Ambrose struggles as he loses consciousness.

FADE TO:

EXT. ROAD - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

A road threads dark fields of grain. The grass ripples.

Ambrose (here 27, as he was) loads bulging sacks into an ox-drawn wagon. He's smiling like a fox, satisfied with himself.

As he picks up the next sack to load, a jeweled chain spills out like a snake. Ambrose quickly snatches it up and shoves it back into the unassuming sack.

Up the road, a pair of sandaled feet pound the dust, running. Their owner breathes heavily, desperate.

Ambrose looks up to see the woman running towards him. She is PESHET (here, 19) -- long, dark curls and honey-brown skin.

She comes to a stop by the wagon, and immediately starts to fill him in, urgently, no time to catch her breath.

PESHET

The decoy boat capsized. They know it was a trick.

He takes her by the shoulders.

AMBROSE

Okay, calm down. Where are the Pharaoh's men now?

PESHET

About a kilometer up the road. They're knocking on doors but they're headed this way.

AMBROSE

Did they get Pippo and Fineas?

PESHET
No. They got away.

AMBROSE
Go into town and get the horses.
Meet me --

PESHET
By the oasis.

AMBROSE
That's right.

A heavy pause, she meets his eyes, concerned.

PESHET
Don't let them catch you.

AMBROSE
(grinning, reassuring)
I never do.
(beat)
I'll see you soon.

INT. AN OUBLIETTE - DAY (PRESENT)

Ambrose, beaten and bruised, wakes to find himself back in his cell after the fight, a rat chewing on his toe. He shakes the vermin off and sighs as he remembers where he is.

He listens as FOOTSTEPS approach.

A GUARD opens the lid of the pit. Ambrose looks up.

GUARD
The Pharaoh wants to see you.

INT. HALLS OF THE ABATON - CONTINUOUS

Ambrose squints as the Guards lead him down the hallway. His dark-adapted eyes squint at the flaring torches.

EXT. ABATON RAMPARTS - DAY

The Guards lead Ambrose outside. He squints his eyes against the blazing sun.

From over his shoulder, we strain to see the shining city. A busy harbor. A pair of colossal bronze sphinxes loom over the waterfront. Ships crowd the river. A forest of sails and towering obelisks -- Atum, a fantastical City of the Pharaohs.

TITLE CARD: **HIEROGLYPH**

EXT. ROYAL PALACE - DAY

A soaring edifice with stone-carved sphinxes and golden bas reliefs. The royal palace and seat of the empire.

EXT. ATRIUM - CONTINUOUS

Sunlight spills into the atrium of the royal residence onto a long reflecting pool planted with reeds and lily pads.

A polished PALACE GUARD sits Ambrose, still bruised and shackled in his prison rags, at the edge of the water.

PALACE GUARD

Wait here.

The Guard goes to fetch the Captain from around the corner, leaving Ambrose in the tranquil stillness of the Atrium.

Ambrose's squinting eyes dart about. He doesn't realize he's being watched from the shadowy balcony above and behind him.

There NEFERTARI KANAKHT (30), the Pharaoh's half-sister, leaning against the rail, watching like a falcon. A rare, exotic beauty, with short black hair and the coal-dark eyes of a thinker. Immaculate, the very picture of control.

Ambrose squints at a gap between the atrium's columns -- a straight shot to a tall window, inviting, teasing the sunlit freedom beyond. He glances around. See no one watching.

Seizes what might be his last chance. In a sudden burst of energy, he sprints for the window.

Still watching from above, Nefertari says nothing. She lets it play out, interested, cocking an eyebrow.

Ambrose is halfway there by the time the Guards notice. He slips between the columns, hurtling towards the window.

He plants his foot on the table under the window, launches himself up, grabs the flowing curtain, and swings out into open air, landing in the lush

PALACE GARDENS

where a cluster of startled peacocks scatter. Ambrose keeps moving forward. He weaves between the flowered bushes and the fronds of the pygmy date palms.

Turning a corner, he runs right into a Guard's fist. The thief lands on his back, caught, just as Captain Rawser catches up. Ambrose scowls up at his old nemesis.

RAWSER

Surely you've learned by now,
Ambrose -- you can't run from me.

The annoyed Captain plants his heel in Ambrose's face.

EXT. MAIN TERRACE - MOMENTS LATER

Rawser drags Ambrose out onto the sunlit terrace overlooking the city beyond. Scantly-clad CONCUBINES loiter about.

The Pharaoh sits by the pool, watching a pair. Apparently naked in the water, they kiss one another for his amusement.

Among them, LOTUS (19), young and wiry, possessed of a more grounded allure than her fellow Concubines. And her best friend, ZITA (20), graceful as a gazelle.

Fresh from his swim, Shai seems casual and friendly (but his charming smile is but the tip of a deep and jagged iceberg).

SHAI
Ah, you must be Ambrose.
(beat)
A little privacy, my dears.

The Concubines chatter and giggle as they scamper off.

INT. CHANGE ROOM - CONTINUOUS

We follow the Concubines through the silk curtain between the terrace and the change room.

As her friends head around the corner, Lotus lingers at the curtain, eavesdropping on the Pharaoh.

EXT. MAIN TERRACE - CONTINUOUS

The Pharaoh gestures to a small table.

SHAI
Have a seat.

AMBROSE
If you insist.

Suddenly, Rawser punches Ambrose hard in the stomach. Ambrose doubles over coughing.

RAWSER
He is your king, and you will address him as such.

SHAI
(chuckles)
Forgive Rawser's brutish way of getting points across.

Ambrose warily takes a seat, coughing. The Pharaoh uncorks a bottle and pours a silver cup of amber-gold liquid.

SHAI (CONT'D)
Drink?

AMBROSE
I'm alright.

Suddenly, Rawser grabs him by the hair and presses the edge of his dagger to Ambrose's nose.

RAWSER

"No thank you, your majesty." You will learn this.

Shai allows it for a moment, then calls his dog off.

SHAI

I think he's gotten the picture, Captain. You may go.

Rawser hesitates. Shai gives him a suddenly serious look. Rawser tightens his lips, bows, and leaves the room.

AMBROSE

Maybe I will take that drink...

Shai starts to pour another cup, then glances up expectantly.

AMBROSE (CONT'D)

(adding)
... your majesty.

Shai grins, pours the wine, and passes it to Ambrose. Bottoms up. Shai takes a seat across from him.

SHAI

The most notorious thief in the Kingdom. Marauder of the King's Barque and the Grand Hall. You're still something of a legend.

AMBROSE

I didn't know that, your grace.

SHAI

Well you can't rob the Royal Tombs without making some impression.

(beat)
Gave my father a well-deserved headache. The pompous bastard never did sort out how you did that one.

AMBROSE

I had my ways, your grace.

SHAI

Of course. Trade secrets. I can respect that. I'm right in assuming you dealt in some mystic contraband?

Ambrose shifts uncomfortably.

SHAI (CONT'D)

Relax. I don't blame you in the least. The demand was out there and you were only meeting it.

(beat)
I'm sure it must seem downright tyrannical, the way we insist on keeping the Old Words locked away.

(MORE)

SHAI (CONT'D)

All those ancient formulas and incantations... But no one remembers the chaos before the Red Kingdom -- when magic was everywhere. Summoning a plague should not be as easy as reading from a scrap of parchment.

AMBROSE

Unless you're the Pharaoh?

The Pharaoh narrows his eyes at Ambrose, and for an uncomfortably long moment, seems to be calculating ways to hurt him, but his smile soon shrugs the sharp jab off.

SHAI

Well, someone has to keep the order.

AMBROSE

Is that what this meeting is about, your grace? Order?

SHAI

You might say that.

He leans forward and gets down to business. His cool voice suddenly has an air of hushed urgency.

SHAI (CONT'D)

Two nights ago, a thief broke into the Inner Tier of the Hoard, and walked out with a scroll -- the Book of Thresholds.

INT. CHANGE ROOM - SAME

Still eavesdropping, Lotus mouths "*Book of Thresholds*," committing the name to memory.

Past the CHATTER of her fellow Concubines, she strains to hear the conversation.

AMBROSE (O.S.)

I've never heard of it.

SHAI (O.S.)

Naturally. (We like to guard the obscurity of items in the Hoard.) This one is a Black Shelf text. You know what that means, right?

EXT. MAIN TERRACE - SAME

Ambrose nods.

AMBROSE

(thinly skeptical)
What is it that this one is said to do, your grace?

Shai gets up to pour himself another drink.

SHAI

For now, all we know is that the censors who sealed it away had reason to fear it. And that is reason for me to want it back.

(beat)

Tauket has grown ambitious in your absence. They've been trying to procure items of such power. Their High Priestess openly admits she would do anything to hurt us.

AMBROSE

Due respect, majesty, but I had nothing to do with this raid. I've been alone in a pit for five years.

SHAI

I know you didn't take the scroll. But I suspect you're the sort of man who can find out who it was.

AMBROSE

How can you trust me not to run?

Shai just smiles, vaguely ominous.

SHAI

Because I am the Pharaoh and you aren't stupid.

INT. CHANGE ROOM - SAME

We see Lotus hurry away, unnoticed.

EXT. TEMPLE OF THE HIDDEN ONE - DAY

A massive stone ram's head looms over a yawning, door-less entrance. WORSHIPPERS drift in and out the cavernous interior.

INT. TEMPLE OF THE HIDDEN ONE - SAME

Lotus glides across the wide marble floor to one of the countless prayer stalls lining the dark and majestic chamber. She opens the wooden door and slips inside.

A small nook with a ring of lit candles on the polished floor. A gossamer curtain divides the front from the back.

Lotus takes off her sandals and steps into the circle. She kneels on the floor and bows her head. It has all the ceremonial trappings of a legit ritual...

We see the vague outline of a hooded, monastic figure on the other side of the translucent curtain. He takes a seat on the floor opposite Lotus. We'll call him the SPYMASTER (for now).

SPYMASTER

The Hidden One is in his Land.

LOTUS
Blessed be the Mother Land.

At this, the Spymaster opens up this whispered de-briefing.

SPYMASTER
Report.

LOTUS
The Hoard has been raided. The Pharaoh brought in an ex-thief to find the missing scroll.

SPYMASTER
What is the scroll?

LOTUS
The Book of Thresholds...

The Spymaster is silent for a moment.

SPYMASTER
Thresholds? You're sure?

LOTUS
Yes.

He gets to his feet, steps forward, and crouches right next to the curtain, so close that Lotus can almost make out the shape of his lips, whispering even lower than before.

SPYMASTER
Follow the thief's investigation.
Contact me as soon as he finds it.

LOTUS
A royal concubine's absence is not long unnoticed.

SPYMASTER
Do what you can. This is the rare species of opportunity around which history pivots.

LOTUS
I will not disappoint.

SPYMASTER
For the Mother Land.

LOTUS
For Tauket.

INT. CORRIDOR - DAY

A GUARD unlocks Ambrose's shackles. Shai watches from a few yards away, satisfied. Rawser speaks to him, hushed and desperately frustrated.

RAWSER
He's a thief, your grace. We can't
just send him out into the kingdom.

SHAI
I assure you, Captain, I can do
whatever I please.

Rawser glances back to Ambrose as the shackles fall off.
Ambrose rubs his wrists and winks at Rawser.

SHAI (CONT'D)
That will be all.

Rawser turns and storms away.

EXT. ATRIUM - MOMENTS LATER

Rawser talks with Magister Bek.

RAWSER
Oser help us.

BEK
It's madness.

RAWSER
You're his Magister. You should be
advising him against such madness.

BEK
He's been keeping me at a distance.

RAWSER
You act as if you don't know why.

BEK
He thinks I'm courting his sister.

RAWSER
You're lucky that's all he thinks.

BEK
Don't believe everything you hear.

RAWSER
I hear the sighs coming from
Nefertari's chambers on the nights
you don't go home.

BEK
How I spend my time is my business.

RAWSER
Advising the Crown is your business.

Ambrose crosses the chamber on his way out. Bek and Rawser
watch him sliding a ring onto his finger.

BEK

We're just sending him out into the Kingdom? With the Pharaoh's ring? We don't know this thief won't just sell the scroll to Tauket himself.

RAWSER

So lets be sure he "disappears" before he finds it...

END ACT ONE

ACT TWO

EXT. OASIS - MORNING (FLASHBACK)

A road winds past a patch of tall grass and palm trees encircling a water hole, a splinter of green tucked between the arid dunes. The younger Ambrose waits, pacing uneasily.

AMBROSE
(to himself)
Come on, Pesh...

He hears a HORSE and looks up to the hill across the road, hopeful, but his smile drops. It's not Peshet.

A trio of the Pharaoh's SOLDIERS on horseback crest the rise. Each armed with a spear. Ambrose turns to run towards the thick foliage of the oasis.

He bolts into the tall reeds by the water, weaving nimbly as he slips through the grass, leading the horse-mounted Soldiers on a brisk, claustrophobic chase.

He nearly runs into one of the horses and turns to head in the other direction, only to be confronted by another.

He realizes (as we see from overhead) that they have encircled him in the tall grass. A younger Captain Rawser trots his horse up, grinning.

RAWSER
Well if it isn't the untouchable
thief... It's over, Ambrose.

The thief raises his hands, giving up.

EXT. SCARABGATE - DAY (PRESENT)

Rain pelts Ambrose as he walks the muddy streets of clustered thatch and stucco houses outside the city gates. The desert mountains loom in the distance under a rain-slashed sky.

He passes a woman smoking under a dripping tapestry awning -- It's Lotus, watching him from the corner of her eyes.

Ambrose glances at her. She quickly looks away. A suspicion furrows his brow, but he shrugs it off.

He arrives at a building with a crude white ankh painted on the wooden door. He takes a breath, and knocks on the door. A woman opens it --

PESHET (now 24), with those familiar long, black curls. Older but still mystic, warm, and sensuous.

He stares up at her as the rain pelts him. She gapes at him, speechless for several seconds.

PESHET

Ambrose...

They stare at one another through the rain.

PESHET (CONT'D)

Gods... Come in...

INT. SACRED PARLOR - LATER

A cozy hole-in-the-wall, festooned with incense burners and oil lamps. Lurid icons of goddesses crowd the walls.

Peshet carefully lights two sticks of incense as Ambrose seems to hide under his hood. A steady rain softly WHISPERS on the thatched roof.

AMBROSE

How's the rest of the crew?

PESHET

Pippo joined up with some Acacian pirate. Fineas just disappeared.

AMBROSE

And you became an adoratrice...

She nods. A wordless tension of fleeting smiles and averted eyes hangs between them as each struggles to evaluate a romance interrupted by five long years of silence.

PESHET

This scroll you mentioned... What happens when you bring it back? They drag you back to the Abaton?

AMBROSE

Who knows? A room in the West Tower maybe. Like an errant noble. Clean bed. View of the river. The Pharaoh will at least owe me a favor.

She stares into the shade of his hood and shakes her head.

PESHET

Put your hood down. I hate trying to talk to you like this.

AMBROSE

It's too bright.

She gets up and brings the flame down on a hanging oil lamp. Then she delicately pulls his hood off his head. She crouches to meet his eyes, and her mood brightens slightly at the sight of them. She grins and fixes his hair.

PESHET

You aren't thinking about running?

AMBROSE
Not without you...

She frowns. A tea kettle WHISTLES. She flees to fix the tea.

AMBROSE (CONT'D)
About that lock...

PESHET
Right. It doesn't matter how complicated the lock is. A charm that opens a common door can open a vault, as long as you believe it.

AMBROSE
And you've never sold your old lock charms to anyone?

She shoots him a hard look, offended by his insinuations.

PESHET
No. I was never actually a thief, you know. It was a phase that ended the minute you got caught.

AMBROSE
You're a woman of faith now.

PESHET
I always was. You keep forgetting -- you found me at the Isis Academy.

He comes up behind her and folds his arms around her waist. She closes her eyes but doesn't surrender to it.

AMBROSE
How could I forget that girl in her vestments? So literate and curious.

He smells her hair. She smirks and gives in a little.

PESHET
So you just wanted to seduce a schoolgirl, is that it?

AMBROSE
I didn't want to seduce anybody.

She puts the tea kettle down, and rolls with it. He holds her closer and she leans into him, letting him kiss her neck.

PESHET
That's funny. Because I remember a certain night in the library...

AMBROSE
You kissed me.

She meets his eyes.

PESHET
You knew I would.

Drawing nearer. It seems as though they're about to kiss, but Ambrose can't help himself...

AMBROSE
Where were you?

She eyes him, not understanding.

AMBROSE (CONT'D)
You never came to the Oasis. I waited for you.

PESHET
You were already gone by the time I got there.

AMBROSE
You're never late.

PESHET
(to herself, pulling away)
This was a mistake.

AMBROSE
(suspicious)
Why?

PESHET
Because I have a new life now.

AMBROSE
Oh? As an adoratrice?

PESHET
It doesn't mean what you think.

AMBROSE
It doesn't mean people pay you to have sex with them as a goddess?

PESHET
I'm not a whore. I'm a holy woman. I'm a surrogate for the goddess. It's a sacred rite.

AMBROSE
You lie with strangers!

PESHET
You haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about.

AMBROSE

I know you can't so much as kiss me... But if I was some nameless drifter, we'd be in bed by now.

PESHET

If you were a believer, maybe we would be.

AMBROSE

Well I can pretend to be a believer just as easily as you can pretend to be a goddess.

Hurt, and afraid he's still the only man who can talk her out of her beliefs, she opens her door to the rainy night.

PESHET

Get out, Ambrose.

EXT. SCARABGATE - CONTINUOUS

Ambrose steps out into the rain as Peshet leans against the doorframe, watching him go, more sad than angry. He turns around and heads back towards her.

AMBROSE

Okay... How much is it? I want religion. How many atons for a night with the goddess?

PESHET

No, Ambrose.

AMBROSE

Why?

PESHET

Because you don't want religion. You want me.

AMBROSE

What's wrong with that?

PESHET

I'm not for sale.

She shuts the door, leaving Ambrose in the rain.

INT. THE BLACK CHAMBER - NIGHT

We're tight on a model of the city as lurid, red storm clouds ominously churn and billow over it. THUNDER rumbles outside.

Wider, we find ourselves in a vast subterranean chamber and see that the city model is at the bottom of an otherwise crystal clear pool cut into the floor. A stark white cow lies dead at the top of a ramp behind the pool, her throat open.

Stone channels funnel her blood into the water, forming the scarlet clouds over the map. Chanting PRIESTS carefully stir and sculpt the "storm" with their long staffs. Odion watches.

ODION

Mind the clouds over the inland hills. Don't want a flash flood.

Shai enters.

SHAI

Tuning the storm?

ODION

Waves in the harbor were starting to crest a bit high, so we decided to bring it in for the night.

SHAI

You sent word that you've learned more about the scroll?

He leads Shai away from the weather map.

ODION

Yes. We believe the Book is an invocational text. It's said to contain formulas for channeling some of the more -- *volatile* Intellects.

SHAI

How volatile exactly?

ODION

Anubis, Set, Montu, Sekhmet... Gods of death, chaos, pestilence, etc...

Shai grapples with this for a moment.

SHAI

What is the worst Tauket could do with such a text?

ODION

Tauket is the least of our worries, your grace. These are gods. We've gone centuries without a manifestation event. If anyone actually manages to use the scroll to summon a god to this plane, it will do as it pleases.

Shai paces, thinking.

SHAI

When all this is sorted, I want to index everything in the Hoard.

Brimming with anxious determination, he turns to go.

SHAI (CONT'D)
Have your priests calculating
countermeasures.

He pauses -- one last question.

SHAI (CONT'D)
Have you been tracking Magister Bek
like I asked?

ODION
He visited her room last night...

SHAI
And...

ODION
He left in the morning, your grace.

The Pharaoh scowls to hear his suspicions confirmed.

EXT. ATRIUM - NIGHT

Rain dances on the reflecting pool. By the torch-lit columns,
Ambrose talks to a pair of wary PALACE GUARDS.

AMBROSE
I was told to return to the palace
when I was done for the day.

Passing through the shadows some distance away, Nefertari
stops when she notices.

NEFERTARI
I'll show him.

PALACE GUARD
Yes, my lady.

The Guard nods and leaves Ambrose to gape at her beauty.

NEFERTARI
Ambrose, is it?

AMBROSE
Yes -- your grace.

NEFERTARI
(laughing)
Sadly, I am without grace. I'm only
the Pharaoh's humble sister. You can
call me Nefertari.

She walks him to his room.

NEFERTARI (CONT'D)
Your investigation is going well?

AMBROSE

We'll see. I'm hoping a few hours' rest will clear my mind.

NEFERTARI

Very wise. My mother always said -- the still croc catches the fawn.

(beat)

You always seem to have your hood up. Why is that?

AMBROSE

I'm still getting used to the light.

NEFERTARI

Ah yes, all that time in the dark. I can't imagine.

INT. STABLES - MOMENTS LATER

Nefertari opens the door to a room in back of the stables. Floor, lined with hay. A hammock hangs between the old timbers. Leftover rain drips from holes in the roof.

NEFERTARI

Not the best room in the palace.

AMBROSE

Better than a pit in the Abaton.

She leans against the doorframe with a wry smirk.

NEFERTARI

Is it really though?

AMBROSE

On the surface at least.

NEFERTARI

Yes, well, remember that this is the palace. You can't trust the surface... You can't trust anyone...

AMBROSE

Not even you, my lady?

A long pause. She gives him a playful half-smile.

NEFERTARI

Especially not me... Goodnight, Ambrose.

EXT. TRADE STREET - DAY

The cobbled streets follow the stark curves of the topography, spilling down to the waterfront crowded with sails.

The color of the Empire blazes in this street. Dark-skinned MERCHANTS. HUNTERS with braided beards. MARINERS trying to woo a cluster of silk-veiled STUDENTS from the Isis Academy.

Ambrose pushes past the bustle as he finds stairs leading to a modest shop-front sunken below the stone street.

INT. CURIO SHOP - CONTINUOUS

The door DINGS a bell as Ambrose enters the dim labyrinth of tight aisles, almost too narrow to navigate. Shelves crammed with dusty scrolls. Trinkets piled haphazardly on the floor.

AMBROSE
Voce? You here?

Ambrose moves through the stacks. The faraway music of a street musician bleeds in from outside, a fiddle slashing out an old, haunting melody, distant and eerie.

AMBROSE (CONT'D)
Vocifer? It's Ambrose...

As he moves deeper into the shop, creeping through pools of shadows, his instincts soften his steps. He feels hunted.

Behind him, we see a second pair of feet on the stone floor, moving closer. Ambrose rounds a corner and finds the way blocked by stacks of small crates. A voice speaks up.

VOCIFER
My gods... You are a noisy bastard.

Ambrose turns to see a silver-haired figure standing in the shadowy aisle behind him. VOCIFER (77), a rough, but charismatic old man. Ambrose's one-time mentor.

VOCIFER (CONT'D)
Five years in the Abaton and you forget everything I ever taught you.

AMBROSE
Vocifer...

He steps into the light He laughs and throws his arms open.

VOCIFER
Well? Come here, boy! Oser's balls!
They let you out!

Ambrose laughs and gives his mentor a warm embrace.

MOMENTS LATER: They sit by the shop's front counter, catching up. Vocifer sips hot tea from a clay cup.

VOCIFER (CONT'D)
How did they ever catch you?

AMBROSE
Something went wrong. I went to meet Pesh at the rendezvous point. But Captain Rawser was there.

VOCIFER
You don't think she gave you up.

AMBROSE
Somebody did.
(beat)
I don't know. Maybe it was Pippo or
Fin. Maybe it was Djet.

VOCIFER
Djet Coptico?

AMBROSE
He was our buyer for the raid.

VOCIFER
He took over the whole Alley while
you were away. All the other bosses
are dead. Djet has it all now.

AMBROSE
Then it had to be him. How else does
Djet's lot sweeten so quickly after
my capture on a job he sent me on?
If Rawser didn't snuff Djet's
competition outright, he at least
looked the other way.

VOCIFER
What can you do about it?

AMBROSE
I can knock on Djet's door.

VOCIFER
You might be better off casting your
lot with the Pharaoh. What did you
say this pilfered scroll was called?

AMBROSE
The Book of Thresholds.

Vocifer slowly puts down his cup.

VOCIFER
(grimly)
The Book of Thresholds?

AMBROSE
You know it?

VOCIFER
Only by reputation. I believe it's
an invocation...

AMBROSE
Summoning the gods and all that?

VOCIFER

It isn't to be mocked. Nothing is more powerful than an invocation.

AMBROSE

I didn't believe in the gods before and prison has done nothing to convince me I was wrong.

VOCIFER

They locked these texts up for a reason. We're not talking about charms and curses. It's a presence. Call it whatever you like. If you open the door, something will come. And it won't answer to you.

AMBROSE

I didn't know there was anything you were scared to grab...

VOCIFER

This is a dangerous text, my friend. It should be locked up.

AMBROSE

Then I suppose there are worse excuses to pay my respects to the new King of the Underworld.

EXT. APOPHIS ALLEY - NIGHT

A winding, seedy thoroughfare, lined with windowless stalls. Ambrose keeps his head low. PROSTITUTES clad only in body paint beckon from shadowy doorways.

INT. THE LAIR - CONTINUOUS

A bar in a gutted subterranean mausoleum. Faded murals moulder on the ancient walls behind shelves of liquor. All eyes are on Ambrose. THUGS crowd the tables and bar, big meaty titans with intricate snake tattoos coiling up their bulging muscles.

DJET

Ambrose...

DJET COPTICO (51) has the burly, twisted physique of a burnt-out prizefighter. Leathery and scarred with a flinty stare and a hook in place of a hand.

AMBROSE

Hey, Djet...

DJET

(to his men)

Feed him to the crocs.

END ACT TWO

ACT THREE

INT. PASSAGEWAY - NIGHT

A dank stone hallway, lit only by a handful of hanging oil lamps. Followed by his two BODYGUARDS, Djet drags Ambrose down the ancient floor by his hair.

AMBROSE
You're making a mistake.

DJET
The mistake was yours. I sent you on a raid and you never delivered.

INT. CROCODILE PIT - CONTINUOUS

Djet throws open the doors to a storage room, dragging Ambrose to some sort of open well carved into the floor.

DJET
You come in here like you're still some big gods-damned deal. But you know what I see? Meat. Just meat.

Djet grabs Ambrose by the collar and hoists him over the well. Ambrose looks down. At the bottom, glistening creatures stir -- HISSING, SNARLING, and SNAPPING -- crocodiles.

DJET (CONT'D)
You were always quick with a quip, Ambrose. Well? Any final thoughts?

Ambrose smiles and flashes the ring on his finger -- the unmistakable seal of the Pharaoh.

AMBROSE
Could you be sure the Pharaoh gets his ring back?

The look on Djet's face -- *Fuck...*

INT. THE LAIR - MOMENTS LATER

Djet has cleared the bar out so he and Ambrose can speak in private. They sit across from one another. A single oil lamp dangles above them -- the only light in the room.

DJET
You still owe me from that last job.

AMBROSE
I got snared in that last job. For all I know, that was the job.

DJET
And what would I get out of that?

AMBROSE

I don't know. You seem to have done quite well for yourself. Better than all the other bosses at least.

Djet brandishes his hook, enraged.

DJET

Did I have this before? I owed people from my cut of your botched score. I got where I am because I decided I was done owing people.

AMBROSE

(at a loss)

They caught me, Djet. What do you want me to say?

Djet spits, disdainfully, but calms down a little.

DJET

The Pharaoh has you looking for something other than trouble?

AMBROSE

The Book of Thresholds.

DJET

Never heard of it.

AMBROSE

(chuckling)

Don't game me, Djet. No scrap of old magic gets pinched in this city without you knowing about it.

DJET

So imagine my surprise.

AMBROSE

Surprised to find out you're not the biggest croc in the rushes?

DJET

You've been gone a while, Ambrose, so I'll fill you in. There are no other crocs.

AMBROSE

Easy, then. If I can't give the Pharaoh the scroll, I'll give him your name. Call it poetic justice.

DJET

(through gritted teeth)

Are you trying to talk me into gutting you?

Ambrose meets his intensity.

AMBROSE

Try it and see what happens.

DJET

Go ahead and tell your Pharaoh that Djjet has his scroll. We'll see what happens to you after he shakes me down and still can't find it.

Ambrose narrows his eyes at Djjet, increasingly puzzled.

DJET (CONT'D)

I tell you what, Ambrose. Bring me this scroll everybody wants so bad and we'll call your debt settled.

AMBROSE

You can't touch me.

DJET

I don't have to.

Realizing the sideways threat, Ambrose glares.

AMBROSE

Are you threatening her?

Djjet raises an eyebrow ominously. Ambrose's eyes drift to the lamp hanging over the table.

AMBROSE (CONT'D)

I've got a better idea.

And with that, he pinches the flame out, plunging the room into darkness. He yanks off his hood -- and for the first time, we see why he wears it all the time --

His dark-adapted eyes can see far better than Djjet and his henchmen, stumbling blindly. Ambrose quickly and effortlessly moves through the darkness.

In a blur, he relieves one Bodyguard of his dagger before using it to knock both guards out. Finally, he levels the knife at Djjet. Djjet reaches for his blade.

AMBROSE (CONT'D)

Don't even try it. Put it on the floor, and kick it over to me.

Djjet kicks the knife. Ambrose kicks it away from them both.

AMBROSE (CONT'D)

Now, drag your guys into the wine room behind the bar, the one where you hide your gold.

With Ambrose ushering him along, Djjet drags his two knocked-out Bodyguards to a hatch in the floor and into the dark wine cellar.

AMBROSE (CONT'D)
Shut the hatch behind you.

Djet begrudgingly shuts himself in the cellar. Ambrose quickly slides a scuffed statue over the hatch.

INT. NEFERTARI'S SUITE - NIGHT

Warm oil-light flickers on a paper veneer behind which a feminine shadow rises from her tub and grabs a towel to dry herself. She blows out the lamp, darkening the screen.

A moment later, Nefertari emerges, tying a thin, linen robe around her waist. She sits at her vanity. In the dull mirror, she spots a shadowed face outside her partially open door.

She gasps and seems to relax when she realizes who it is.

NEFERTARI
Shai. You startled me. Come in.

The Pharaoh strolls in.

SHAI
Sorry. I've just been roaming the halls, dwelling on some things.

NEFERTARI
What sorts of things?

Shai sits on a nearby chaise lounge and stares into space.

SHAI
A premonition Odion relayed to me...

She stops brushing and eyes him purposefully. He looks at her, weighing his trust in her, and finally decides against elaborating further.

SHAI (CONT'D)
Nothing you should worry about.

She turns back to brushing her hair.

NEFERTARI
You talked to Bek about it?

SHAI
"Bek." You're so casual.

NEFERTARI
He's more than the Magister. He's your friend.

SHAI
And yours too, right?

NEFERTARI

You don't confide in him like you used to. He's just concerned about you. We both are.

SHAI

You spoke with him?

NEFERTARI

The other night.

SHAI

In passing?

NEFERTARI

We shared a bottle of wine.

Shai sees the empty clay bottle on the night-stand, the scattered candles burned down to their nubs, the fresh roses on the dresser. He runs his hand over the bedspread.

SHAI

How touching. My sister and the Magister, sharing their *concern* for me over a bottle of wine.

NEFERTARI

Your plans are a mystery to him. He sees you sending a thief to find a scroll and can't make sense of it.

SHAI

Then you can explain it to him. Ambrose was your idea.

NEFERTARI

A dangerous text was taken from the Hoard. I just suggested you consult a professional raider.

SHAI

You suggested him in particular -- as if you knew something about him.

NEFERTARI

Everybody knows something about him. He's the most notorious contrabandist alive.

SHAI

What else is he?

NEFERTARI

Is that not enough?

SHAI

It isn't all. You know something about him. Something you haven't said. I've been reading that face for as long as I remember.

NEFERTARI
I don't lie to you, brother.

SHAI
Oh? Did Bek spend the night?

She meets his eyes in her mirror. She purses her lips and finally answers, unashamed.

NEFERTARI
Yes. He did.

He joins her at her mirror and gently rakes his fingertips through her long hair. His eyes, utterly pained.

SHAI
Why do you waste yourself on your lessers? You could be my Queen. Nothing would please me more.

NEFERTARI
You are my brother.

His eyes fall on a stiletto letter opener on the tabletop.

SHAI
Half-brother...

NEFERTARI
It isn't done anymore.

Suddenly, Shai tightens his grip on her hair, pulling her head back as he grabs the stiletto and presses it to her neck. Stiff, she betrays no dread as he snarls in her ear.

SHAI
I decide what's done. I could have you right now if I saw fit. I could strip you naked and pin you to the cold marble and no one would stop me. I am the Pharaoh.

Slowly and calmly, she reaches up to touch his wrist.

NEFERTARI
(whispering)
You're also the brother I've always relied on to protect me.

He catches sight of her face in the mirror -- nervous but restrained; his own face -- red and *frustrated*, so unlike a Pharaoh. Slowly, he puts the blade down and composes himself.

SHAI
I would never hurt you. You know that, right?

Nefertari gives him an obligatory nod. He turns and curtly leaves. She breathes a sigh of relief.

EXT. WATERFRONT - NIGHT

Ambrose walks along the empty waterfront. Waves slap against the stone slipways. Moored ships sway gently in the tide.

Ambrose stops and turns, thinking he heard FOOTSTEPS. The strand winds behind him, vacant.

He continues. More FOOTSTEPS. Looks back, catching sight of a darting shadow, ducking behind a pile of crab traps. He is being followed.

Ambrose runs, threading the maze of crates and cargo bails. FOOTSTEPS behind him. He stealthily hops from the deck of one boat to the next, from dock to dock and along old stone piers.

Glancing over his shoulder, he can't get a clear look at his pursuers through all the shadows and clutter. He darts from the waterfront into the city.

EXT. BACK-ALLEYS - CONTINUOUS

Ambrose keeps running, darting abruptly around corners, deeper and deeper into the narrowing back-alleys.

We see his pursuers. Two masked men (WRAITH and ASP) in padded black, like urban ninjas, each with a long sickle-sword.

Ambrose rounds the corner to find a dead end. No more alley. Just three stone walls... And a door...

MOMENTS LATER: Wraith and Asp round the corner into the dead end. They investigate the wooden door, now kicked in, but stop at the threshold --

The rotted stairs extend just a few steps before dropping to a jagged heap of debris on an abandoned cellar floor. Before they realize the trap, Ambrose shoves them from behind, sending Asp over the edge to be skewered on the rubble below.

Wraith catches his hooked sword on the step and hurls himself back up, kicking Ambrose into the alley, where he stumbles to the ground. Wraith comes out swinging -- nimble, swift, lethal. He's trying to take Ambrose's head off.

Ambrose dodges one swing, then another, and surprisingly -- catches Wraith's wrist and twists the sword out.

In the same breath, Ambrose swings the stolen sword -- and sends Wraith's head rolling across the uneven cobblestone.

As the body falls, Ambrose drops the sword and turns away, closing his eyes to sort himself out. He crouches to inspect the body, and shudders when he notices --

A bronze cobra buckle on the man's belt. They aren't Djet's hoods. They're Nightmen, the Pharaoh's Guard.

END ACT THREE

ACT FOUR

INT. THE PHARAOH'S CHAMBERS - CONTINUOUS

Shai lays on his bed, shirtless, arms folded behind his head. He shuts his eyes, furrows his brow, and sighs.

LOTUS
You seem sad, my lord.

He turns and watches Lotus approach from the candle-licked shadows. A beaded net tunic hangs provocatively on her otherwise naked body.

SHAI
I was just imagining something I can't have.

LOTUS
Is there such a thing?

She climbs onto the bed and stands on her knees beside Shai, letting him touch her.

SHAI
There is. Something so close but so far out of reach.

He runs his hand absently along the beaded mesh on her stomach and up to her chest.

LOTUS
I'm in reach, my lord.

SHAI
And you will do... for now.

He grins and hooks his finger in the mesh to tug her down to his lips. They kiss for a moment. He pulls away, wincing playfully at something unseen.

SHAI (CONT'D)
Mmm, I think it's about time you two switched places.

Suddenly, a second concubine, Zita, crawls into frame from down below Shai's waist, smiling and somewhat winded.

Zita squirms her way up to kiss the Pharaoh as Lotus bends to replace her.

Offscreen, a man CLEARS HIS THROAT. The concubines whirl to look. Zita screams. Lotus cowers. The Pharaoh just smirks.

Across the room, a hooded man, Ambrose, sits beside the flaring gossamer curtains over the terrace.

SHAI (CONT'D)
Master Ambrose. What a surprise.
(to concubines)
(MORE)

SHAI (CONT'D)
 You may return to your quarters.
 I'll send for you if I need you.

The girls quickly slide their nightgowns on and go. Shai stands and wraps a linen skirt around his waist.

SHAI (CONT'D)
 I'm startled at how easy it is to slip past my guards.

AMBROSE
 Not easy. Just not impossible.

SHAI
 And why shouldn't I have you drawn and quartered for it?

AMBROSE
 Because the fact that I can makes me valuable to you, your grace.

Shai smirks.

INT. THE CORRIDOR - CONTINUOUS

Lotus gently shuts the chamber door. Zita pauses to wait for her. Lotus gestures for her to go ahead.

LOTUS
 (whispering)
 Go. I'll be right there.

ZITA
 (whispering)
 What are you doing?

She watches Zita go and gingerly pushes the door open just a hair. She crowds the crack and listens.

INT. THE PHARAOH'S CHAMBERS - CONTINUOUS

AMBROSE
 Besides. It was necessary. Someone in your palace is trying to kill me.

SHAI
 What makes you say that?

AMBROSE
 A pair of Nightmen with an urge to open my throat.

Ambrose sets the pair of cobra pendants on the table.

SHAI
 You killed them? Both of them?

AMBROSE

I did what I had to do. But they're your men and I just thought you'd like to know, your grace.

SHAI

Indeed.

AMBROSE

And not that I can't imagine why you wouldn't trust me, but that concubine you had tailing me earlier -- she's a clumsy follow.

Shai leans forward, digesting this unexpected revelation.

INT. CORRIDOR - CONTINUOUS

Zita peeks around the corner, stunned to find Lotus still listening at the chamber door.

ZITA

(whispering)

Lotus! ... Come on!

Lotus shushes her.

INT. THE PHARAOH'S CHAMBERS - CONTINUOUS

Shai watches the door out the corner of his eye, keenly aware of the WHISPERS in the hall as he talks to Ambrose, pretending he's not surprised to hear about the concubine.

SHAI

Which one?

AMBROSE

Short hair. Freckles. Just in here.

SHAI

Oh? You saw her, did you?

AMBROSE

I spotted her right away. A royal concubine is not easy to overlook.

SHAI

What about the scroll?

AMBROSE

I need to talk to the Hoard Guard.

SHAI

Captain Rawser interviewed them.

AMBROSE

I once made my entire living in Rawser's blind spot. I can read the details he would miss.

SHAI

The Guard are a rather monastic lot.
They don't much talk to outsiders.
(beat)

Show him the ring. I can't promise
he'll cooperate, but I can promise
he'll be punished if he doesn't.

AMBROSE

He'll cooperate, your grace.

Shai smirks at Ambrose's certainty as the thief rises to go.

INT. THE CORRIDOR - CONTINUOUS

Zita grabs Lotus by the arm to drag her away, but the door
suddenly opens. Ambrose nods curtly at the girls and leaves.
Shai steps into the doorway and eyes the stunned girls.

SHAI

What are you still doing out here?

ZITA

In case there was anything else...

He narrows his eyes at them, vaguely suspicious. He backs them
against the wall and looks them both up and down.

SHAI

Wait here. I'll be back.

They both nod. He goes. They turn to each other, nervous.

INT. THRONE ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

A cast iron firebowl smolders on the floor. Shai stands at an
archway overlooking the city. Rawser enters behind him.

SHAI

You jeopardized the investigation.

RAWSER

He can't be trusted.

SHAI

Can you be trusted?

RAWSER

You know I can, your grace.

SHAI

Don't tell me what I know. My plans
are beyond you. You do not take
matters into your own hands.

(beat)

Would my father have forgiven this?

RAWSER

Never, your grace.

SHAI

Hand over your pendant.

Rawser takes the bronze cobra from around his neck and passes it to the Pharaoh -- who chucks in the fire bowl.

SHAI (CONT'D)

My judgement is sacred. Whether it makes sense or not. Your job is not to think for yourself. Your job is to do exactly as I say. So you can either pick up your metal, or take your leave and never return...

Rawser goes to the firebowl and picks up his now white hot pendant, clenching it in his fist as he stands at attention. He grits his teeth as his skin SIZZLES.

Shai pours a cup of water, letting Rawser stand there, red-faced and trembling, his pendant SEETHING in his palm.

Confident an impression has been made, Shai offers the water. Rawser extends his fist and drops the cobra into the cup.

EXT. IMPERIAL HOARD - NIGHT

We move in on a watchtower -- flags FLAPPING in the breeze.

EXT. WATCHTOWER - CONTINUOUS

Gothic, cold stone walls. Werin stands at the crown of the open tower overlooking the grounds, squinting through a collapsible spyglass, trying to ignore Ambrose.

WERIN

I have nothing to say to a raider.

AMBROSE

You know the Pharaoh sent me...

WERIN

The Hoard has outlasted dynasties on our watch. My grandfather guarded the Hoard. My father guarded the Hoard. And who are you? A scrawny hyena gnawing on the scraps of history. You think I'm going to talk to you just because you have a ring?

Werin turns back to his spyglass, looking over the grounds.

WERIN (CONT'D)

Get out of my tower, you degenerate, before I toss you out the window.

Suddenly, Ambrose twists the excess flag rope around Werin's arm and tips him over the edge. Calmly, he lets the guard dangle hundreds of feet in the air.

AMBROSE

Don't try so hard to convince a guy
he's a hyena. He might just bite.

WERIN

Rot, you son of a bitch.

AMBROSE

Look at me, friend. Am I panicking?
I can sit here until the rope snaps.

Werin eyes the rope, its fibers STRAINING. He looks down. He
turns a corner and starts to spill it.

WERIN

She came through the fog--

AMBROSE

She? It was a woman?

WERIN

It was in her voice.

AMBROSE

What did she say?

WERIN

I don't know. It made me sleepy.

AMBROSE

Come on Werin. Give me something.

WERIN

I don't have anything!

AMBROSE

Are you sure?

WERIN

She was practically a ghost! She
left no trace! Just a whiff of roses
and pinewood and she was gone!

Ambrose raises his eyebrow -- an epiphany.

INT. THE PHARAOH'S CHAMBERS - NIGHT

Lotus sits on the edge of the bed. Zita paces, arms crossed.

ZITA

If you got me in trouble--

LOTUS

I didn't get you in trouble.

ZITA

Why were you listening to--

Shai enters, cutting Zita off.

SHAI
Hello girls.

They stand and bow slightly. Shai shuts the door behind him.

SHAI (CONT'D)
Sit down. Please.

Zita sits in the nearest chair. Lotus sits uneasily on the edge of the bed. Shai paces around them.

SHAI (CONT'D)
My father had a concubine called
Dahlia. She was a spy. She passed
state secrets to Tauket -- until,
overcome by guilt, she confessed to
my father.
(beat)
Do you know what happened to her?

Lotus and Zita exchange wordless glances.

SHAI (CONT'D)
She was spared. And eventually, she
gave birth to me.
(beat)
I can appreciate how a young girl
might get caught up in things.

He rests an idle hand on Lotus's shoulder.

SHAI (CONT'D)
What is Zita short for?

ZITA
My lord?

SHAI
Zitamun? Daughter of Amun, right?
It's pretty. Why shorten it?

He starts to rub Zita's neck and shoulders. Zita furrows her brow nervously. Lotus watches, tense.

ZITA
I don't recall, my lord.

SHAI
You must have thought it would be
easier to get a position in the
royal court without a reference to
Tauket's patron god in your name.

ZITA
Zita is just what my mother always
called me, my lord.

He smiles and pulls up a stool and sits across from her.

SHAI
You were at the pool when Ambrose
arrived yesterday.

ZITA
Yes, my lord.

SHAI
And out in the hall when I was
talking to him.

Zita nods sheepishly.

SHAI (CONT'D)
Do you know what we were talking
about? Do you realize what's
happening? An extraordinarily
dangerous scroll has been stolen
from the Hoard.

ZITA
(quiet)
I didn't know that...

He shoots her a look as if to ask, "Really?"

ZITA (CONT'D)
(quieter)
I'd heard rumors...

SHAI
And did you go out last night?

ZITA
No, my lord, I was here all day.

SHAI
You're sure?
(to Lotus)
Was she here last evening, Lotus?

Lotus sputters, no idea what to say.

SHAI (CONT'D)
Lotus can't say. Why is that, Zita?

Zita just stares at Lotus in disbelief, her eyes begging --
Help me out. Shai smooths Zita's hair and smiles reassuringly.

SHAI (CONT'D)
Just say it, Zita.

ZITA
My lord?

SHAI
Tell me you're a Tauketi spy.

Ice-cold panic seizes her. Stunned, hurt, and terrified, she
can barely form the words to protest.

ZITA
Wh-- What?

SHAI
It's okay. We can sort it out.

Lotus watches Zita's desperation in strained silence, tears welling in her eyes.

ZITA
I'm -- I'm not a spy.

He stands to retrieve something from his bedside table.

SHAI
Zita, dear, we can't work something out unless you tell me the truth.

She crumples to her knees, begging him to believe her.

ZITA
I am telling the truth, my lord. On my life, I'm not a spy.

SHAI
On your life? ... So be it.

He turns and swiftly drives a long thin knife through her temple. Zita falls back, dead.

Lotus screams. Frantic GUARDS burst in.

SHAI (CONT'D)
We're fine. Remove the body.

They do, leaving a streak blood across the marble floor. As they leave, Shai wipes the knife clean.

LOTUS
(voice cracking)
She wasn't a spy...

SHAI
I know. I wanted you to witness how denying the accusation will end.

She gapes, wide-eyed.

SHAI (CONT'D)
Come now, Lotus. Tauket recruits from within the Ipet and we like controlling who they will recruit. A farm-girl from the borderlands? I knew you'd be a spy before you did. It's the only reason you're here.

She stares at the smear of Zita's blood on the floor, confounded by the revelations. His finger on her chin, Shai turns her head to face him.

SHAI (CONT'D)

So here's what will happen. You will not tell your handler any of this. You will tell him only what I ask you to tell him. Starting tonight, you are a counterspy.

He smiles down at her, letting it all sink in.

SHAI (CONT'D)

You've had a rough night, my dear. Time for bed, I think.

LOTUS

Yes, my lord.

Faltering, she gets up and shuffles to the door.

SHAI

Where are you going?

She stops and turns. Shai sits on his bed, smiles, and gently (almost too gently) pats the sheets -- an invitation.

SHAI (CONT'D)

Take off your nightgown.

She peels her gown off. She crosses the bloody floor tensely, as if she's never been naked, and slips into bed with Shai.

EXT. SCARABGATE - NIGHT

The wind blows plumes of desert dust down the empty thoroughfare as Ambrose stands across from Peshet's place. Her windows are dark. Ambrose works up the nerve and crosses the street. After a barrage of knocks, she comes to the door.

PESHET

What do you want, Ambrose?

He looks over his shoulder.

AMBROSE

Ask me in, Pesh.

PESHET

We've been over this --

AMBROSE

We need to have a conversation. And we need to have it inside.

Finally, she steps aside and motions for him to come in.

INT. SACRED PARLOR - CONTINUOUS

Tight on curls of smoke drifting up from a censer. Ambrose steps inside the parlor and draws a deep, nostalgic breath.

AMBROSE

There it is. Roses and pinewood. I can't tell you how often I tried to remember that smell in the Abaton.

Peshet throws up her hands, exasperated.

PESHET

What is this about?

AMBROSE

Djet doesn't have the Book of Thresholds. Meaning the thief never tried to sell it.

PESHET

It's hours before dawn. What does this have to do with --

AMBROSE

My list of thieves who know lock-charms is short. But my list of lock-charmers who'd break into the Hoard to steal one holy text they had no intention of selling is exactly one person long.

(beat)

I know you have the scroll, Pesh.

PESHET

Oh, is that right?

AMBROSE

I should've seen it. It was never a heist. You were liberating a holy text. You told me yourself. You're not a whore. It wasn't about making money. It was about faith.

She scowls, knowing she's caught.

PESHET

(whispering)

Don't take this. Please.

AMBROSE

Where is it?

Without a word, she goes back to her altar and clears off some books and trinkets to reveal the unfurled scroll: ancient paper embroidered in unreadable symbols.

PESHET

You can't take it, Ambrose. Not yet. I'm so close to getting it.

AMBROSE

You tried it already?

PESHET

Maybe my pronunciation was off.

AMBROSE

Why would you be so reckless as to
raid the Hoard by yourself to--

PESHET

I'm tired of pretending!

(beat)

Ancient adoratrices didn't just
pretend to be goddesses. They
channeled goddesses. I'm tired of
symbols and metaphors. I want to be
humbled. I want something -- real.

AMBROSE

And maybe you're looking in all the
wrong places.

PESHET

They pulled you out of the Abaton to
find that scroll. It scares them. If
it's dangerous, it's real.

AMBROSE

It's dangerous because of what
they'll do to get it. It's dangerous
because they believe it summons
gods. There are no gods, Pesh.

PESHET

You let me try the incantation.
Right now. If nothing happens, take
the scroll. But if the goddess
comes, you let me keep it.

AMBROSE

There are no gods, Pesh.

PESHET

Then you can only win.

MOMENTS LATER: Standing behind her altar, she reads from the
scroll. With a measured and impassioned tone, she lets the
ancient, impenetrable language spill from her lips.

PESHET (CONT'D)

(subtitled)

*(Sekhmet, Giver of Ecstasies, your
humble servant offers her body as a
threshold unto this mortal plane.)*

She closes her eyes and continues from memory. Ambrose crosses
his arms, watching with increasing discomfort.

PESHET (CONT'D)

(subtitled)

*(The world yearns for your touch,
Blessed Awakener.*

(MORE)

PESHET (CONT'D)
*Let this flesh become thy glove.
 Fill me, Fire of Heaven. I belong to
 you.)*

She finishes and opens her eyes. An uneventful moment passes. The tension falls away. Ambrose arches an eyebrow, unimpressed. Peshet's hopeful look starts to wane.

Suddenly, the lamps go dark, leaving only the dull glow of the street torches leaking through the curtains. Silence. A breeze caresses Peshet's hair. An instant later, she convulses.

AMBROSE
 (not buying it)
 Cut it out, Pesh...

The seizure throws her into the wall, sending icons and pictures crashing to the floor. Ambrose takes off his hood and takes a step closer.

AMBROSE (CONT'D)
 Peshet! Stop!

Her spine arches against the wall as she grunts through gritted teeth. Then, she relaxes.

She stands limply in the darkness behind the altar catching her breath, head down, long hair framing her face in shadows.

She looks up. Her expressionless eyes catch the torches outside, flickering in the dark like a cat's eyes.

PESHET (SEKHMET)
 Peshet is absent. Her body is inhabited by Sekhmet, the Lioness, Queen of Night. Submit to her, Ambrose of Atum.

Her voice has a different quality to it. We feel as though this silhouette peering at us through two shining eyes is not who it was seconds ago. Ever the un-believer, Ambrose scoffs.

AMBROSE
 I'm flattered she knows my name...

PESHET (SEKHMET)
 I know all of your names, even the name you yourself do not yet know -- the name written in your blood.

AMBROSE
 (unsettled)
 Pesh... What is this?

PESHET (SEKHMET)
 This, Ambrose of Atum, is the night you lie with the goddess, and begin to fathom your destiny.

She unties her robe and lets it fall, leaving her body cloaked only in darkness. As temptation gathers momentum, Ambrose tries to cling to caution.

AMBROSE

And what if I don't believe in the goddess?

She advances like a predator through tall grass; fluid and silent; her shadowy, hourglass silhouette passing through teasing slashes of light.

PESHET (SEKHMET)

You will.

She presses herself against him, curls her fingers in his hair, and pulls his face to her lips -- and he is hers.

INT. PESHET'S BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER

The thunderstorm has returned, more intense than earlier, as if answering the goddess's passion. Sheets of rain LASH the roof. Lightning flares. Thunder CRACKS.

We're tight on the lovers as they tangle in the dark. His lips on her collarbone. Her legs pushing against twisted sheets. His arms clinging desperately.

INT. THE BLACK CHAMBER - SAME

On the pool-map of Atum, a thunderhead of billowing blood has begun to pile itself up, blistering with lightning. One of the Weather Priests leads Odion down to the map.

WEATHER PRIEST

We've got a storm forming over the Scarabgate district.

ODION

Snuff it out.

The Weather Priest tries to disperse the cloud, but one of the thunderbolts shoots up his pole and knocks him back.

Odion watches in horror as the storm-cloud bulges and roils, taking a shape resembling the roaring head of a lioness.

INT. PESHET'S BEDROOM - SAME

Lightning flashes outside as Peshet tosses her head back. Her amber eyes blaze. She clenches her teeth and we see that they've grown sharp and predatory.

Claws split from her fingertips. She digs them into Ambrose's bare back and rakes them down, gouging his flesh.

Ambrose gasps, wide-eyed, not from the pain, but from the storm of visions that have suddenly surged into his mind:

-- *An anonymous figure in a simple, wooden jackal mask turns to face us...*

-- *In a dark alley, a lioness crouching over a dead body snarls, flashing her blood-slick teeth...*

-- *A bloody knife tumbles out of Ambrose's hands...*

-- *Flames consume a statue bust; the paint blisters and blackens, obscuring the face as a boiling, skull-like shadow.*

-- *Mourners bear a black sarcophagus through the rain...*

TO BLACK:

END ACT FOUR

ACT FIVE

THE NIGHT SKY

Thick storm clouds slowly clear from the face of the moon.

EXT. SCARABGATE - NIGHT

A scrawny cat darts across the quiet street.

INT. PESHET'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Peshet sleeps. Ambrose sits on the edge of the bed, staring through the door into her parlor, where the scroll still sits on the alter. He turns to look at Peshet.

Fast asleep. Her hair splayed across the pillow.

PESHET (V.O.)
How can you believe in magic but not
the gods?

EXT. OASIS - DAY (FLASHBACK)

In a cloister of tall reeds, the younger Peshet and Ambrose rest on a blanket over the sand. The sun sparkles on the water. The wind ripples the tall grass.

AMBROSE
There's a big difference between
believing in lock charms and
thinking the wind blows because a
man with a falcon head tells it to.

She smiles. They "argue" as two people newly in love, disagreeing as they look dotingly at one another.

PESHET
The heka is the residue of the gods.
If not that, what?

AMBROSE
I don't know how your charms work,
but I don't know how to play the
lyre either. Doesn't mean music is
the residue of the gods. Magic is a
lever to stone for all I know.

PESHET
But how does one find purpose in a
godless world?

AMBROSE
I've found purpose well enough.

PESHET
(playfully)
What? Thieving?

AMBROSE

You...

INT. PESHET'S BEDROOM - NIGHT (PRESENT)

An older and more weathered man now, our Ambrose looks painfully at Peshet's sleeping face.

EXT. NEFERTARI'S BALCONY - NIGHT

A wide platform overlooking the darkened avenues of Atum. Rainwater drips from the palm fronds and pools on the stones. A chorus of hushed moans seethe in the background.

Nefertari is hunched on a flat sofa, straddling Bek under the curtain of her open linen robe.

She moves herself against him with a tenuously quiet urgency as we see his hands sliding under the sheer fabric to hold her hips. A brief, sharp sound spills from her mouth.

BEK

(laughing quietly)

Sshh, someone will hear.

She bites her lip, finishing as she stifles the last of her moans in her throat. She rolls herself off to lay beside him.

BEK (CONT'D)

That was -- incredible.

Bek laughs, exhausted. Nefertari catches her breath, turning her finger in her hair.

BEK (CONT'D)

I can still smell the rain...

After a pensive silence, Nefertari quietly spills it.

NEFERTARI

My brother knows about us.

BEK

(taken aback)

He has his suspicions, but--

NEFERTARI

He asked me if you spent the night.

BEK

And you said yes?

NEFERTARI

What was I supposed to say. He only asked because he knew. He was bound to find out eventually.

Bek lays his head back, taking stock of the situation.

NEFERTARI (CONT'D)
Perhaps it's for the best.

BEK
What do you mean?

NEFERTARI
I've cherished this, truly, but --
my brother needs you. He's losing
his grip. Your advice has always
been a sobering influence on him.

As he puts it all together, Bek looks at her, stunned.

BEK
Is it over. Is that what you want?
She has trouble answering the question.

NEFERTARI
I want what's best for the Empire.

BEK
Look, it was foolish, but I've let
this become important to me. I can't
just shrug it off.

NEFERTARI
You think I can?

BEK
I don't know.

She looks at him as if across a widening gulf as the wind
tosses her hair about her hurt eyes.

Bek softens. He sighs.

BEK (CONT'D)
I just don't want to lose you over
this. Whoever you're with, he won't
approve. And either way, he'll never
forgive me for having been with you.
(beat)
If there's anything to us, we may as
well find out.

She regards him with a tearful longing in her eyes, and plants
a kiss on his lips. They break to embrace.

BEK (CONT'D)
Whatever happens, we're in this
together, right?

Over his shoulder, we see the vaguely mischievous smirk
creeping across her lips.

NEFERTARI
Yes. Together...

INT. PESHET'S BEDROOM - MORNING

Peshet opens her eyes, waking up to sounds in the next room. She looks under the sheets and notices her lack of clothes. She sits up in bed with a confused look on her face.

INT. SACRED PARLOR - CONTINUOUS

Ambrose putters in the kitchen, brewing a pot of tea.

PESHET (O.S.)
It worked.

He looks up to see Peshet standing in the door, holding the bedsheet around herself and beaming.

PESHET (CONT'D)
It was Sekhmet, wasn't it?

AMBROSE
You don't remember -- anything?

PESHET
(impishly)
No, but I see you didn't hesitate to take advantage of the situation.

AMBROSE
(unamused)
I didn't know what was happening, Pesh. For all I knew, it was a kind of game. It's not as if you've never invited me to your bed.

PESHET
What happened? Did you have a vision? What did you see?

AMBROSE
Maybe it was something you put in the tea, or burned in the incense.

She chuckles, still too excited to be offended.

PESHET
You think I was playing you?

AMBROSE
Is there anything you wouldn't do to keep that scroll?

PESHET
Why can't you just accept that something miraculous happened?

He turns. Peshet gasps when she sees the gashes on his back.

PESHET (CONT'D)
Oh gods -- your back...

He grabs his shirt and quickly pulls it on.

AMBROSE

The memory of holding you is the only thing that kept me sane for five years in the dark. The smell of your hair. The feel of your skin. The conviction that I'd be there again one day and know I was whole.

(beat)

What happened last night was a cruel shadow of that memory.

Peshet frowns at Ambrose as he puts on his sandals.

PESHET

Where are you going?

AMBROSE

Somewhere far away.

PESHET

You can't run.

AMBROSE

Well I'm not going to turn you in and I refuse to rot in that pit.

PESHET

The Pharaoh will kill you.

AMBROSE

Only if he catches me.

She sits across from him and holds out the scroll.

PESHET

Just take it.

Ambrose just looks at the scroll and chuckles.

AMBROSE

I can't take the last thing in this world that means anything to you for a cozier prison cell.

PESHET

It's not the last thing that means anything to me...

He meets her eyes, starting to brim with tears.

PESHET (CONT'D)

I wouldn't trade your life for it.

AMBROSE

I don't know what I am to you...

PESHET

Important... Take the scroll.

He looks down at the scroll, then back to Peshet. He takes the scroll and touches her cheek.

She gives him a bittersweet smile. He nods and leaves, not giving himself a chance to miss her.

EXT. MAIN TERRACE - MORNING

A pool lined with alabaster statues and potted ferns dominates the terrace. Peacocks pace the tiled floor. Concubines sun themselves and chat by the water. Lotus sits among them.

Across the pool, Ambrose sits at a table with the scroll. Shai enters and crosses to him. The thief hands over the scroll.

AMBROSE

As promised, your grace.

He casts a glance towards Rawser. The Captain hangs his head.

SHAI

Did you find the thief?

AMBROSE

No, your grace... Word has it the thief already skipped town.

Shai takes a hard look at Ambrose, but he doesn't flinch. Shai smiles and passes the scroll to Captain Rawser (cradling his bandaged hand). Rawser takes the scroll and goes.

SHAI

Job well done, Ambrose. Take a seat, please. Unless you're in a rush to get back to the Abaton.

The Pharaoh takes a seat across from Ambrose. He stares off.

SHAI (CONT'D)

My Head Priest has forecast that there will be an attempt on my life before the spring.

Ambrose squints at Shai, not quite understanding the point.

SHAI (CONT'D)

Pharaohs once relied on an agent called the Scepter, a one-man solution, a precision instrument to finesse the most delicate problems.

(beat)

I want you to be the Scepter.

AMBROSE

You trust me?

SHAI

I trust your skills. I trust that you don't want to return to prison.

(beat)

(MORE)

SHAI (CONT'D)

You'd have a room here in the Sanctum, able to come and go as you please, answering to no one but me.

Shai smiles and tosses up his hands, as if the decision is obvious. Ambrose considers this offer.

AMBROSE

I don't know what I bring to the table, sir. Your world mystifies me, and mine has moved on. It's not my game. And I'm not a man who's used to having blood on his hands.

He takes off the ring and passes it the Pharaoh.

SHAI

I understand. We can make you somewhat comfortable in the Abaton.

The Pharaoh leans forward and lowers his voice.

SHAI (CONT'D)

But what do you think would happen to that adoratrice of yours while you were locked away?

Ambrose eyes Shai as the Pharaoh considers his ring.

SHAI (CONT'D)

Did you think I would just let you loose in my city? Did you really think this ring was just a ring? I have more ways of watching people than you will ever know.

(pocketing the ring)

Of course I know who the thief is.

Shai stands up to pour himself and Ambrose a drink.

SHAI (CONT'D)

The question is: are you a patriot devoted to the Empire, or are you a convict? Because when a patriot vouches for someone, I listen. But a convict is owed no such favors. And stealing a Black Shelf text is treason. She'd be thrown onto the brazier, roasted alive until there's nothing left but ashes and bones. Is that really what you want?

Shai offers him a drink. Ambrose glares at Shai from under his hood. He looks at the glass. He's no fool. He knows that when the Pharaoh offers you a drink, you take it. So he does.

AMBROSE

Alright... I'm in.

SHAI
(smiling)
I'm pleased to hear it. The Steward
will show you to your quarters.

INT. CORRIDOR -- MOMENTS LATER

The STEWARD leads Ambrose down the hallway. Ambrose pauses, seeing something on the wall. He pulls down his hood.

Before we see the object of interest, we FLASH to an image from Ambrose's vision: *The burning bust; its subject, an anonymous shadow boiling in the flames.*

Here and now, this is the very bust that stands before Ambrose, intact and unblemished -- such that he can see it is a sculpture of the Pharaoh himself, Shai Kanakht.

INT. SACRED PARLOR -- DAY

Peshet opens a drawer behind her altar. Inside, beside a quill and inkwell, we find a meticulously hand-copied section of the scroll -- the exact passage she'd recited.

She pulls down an etched bronze icon hanging on the wall to expose a hole in the stucco. She tucks the parchment into the hole and hangs the icon back in place.

She rubs off her fingerprints and catches her reflection in the polished bronze. She gives herself a hard look, coming to terms with the deception.

Slowly, she arrives at an uneasy peace with herself. She nods and goes, but -- Her reflection lingers on the surface.

Oblivious, Peshet blows out the lamp, and in the reflection, her doppelganger's eyes shine like a cat's.

TO BLACK.